

Family Support Group

Leader Basic Handbook

Operation R.E.A.D.Y.
Resources for Educating About Deployment and You

Operation R.E.A.D.Y.

Designed for Soldiers and Families of the Active Army, the Army National Guard, and the Army Reserve

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Family support groups are an integral component in family readiness. FSGs provide a network of communication between family members, the chain of command, and community resources. FSG leaders play a pivotal role in the success of their groups. The Family Support Group Leader Basic Handbook is a resource intended to address the needs of newly appointed FSG leaders. The handbook can be used to conduct trainings for new leaders, but is especially helpful as a source of reference for leaders. If the handbook is used for training purposes, it is recommended that the Operation R.E.A.D.Y. video, Another Family, be incorporated into the training. The video can be shown either before or after presentation of the information in the handbook.

Family Support Group Overview

Definition

A Family Support Group (FSG) is an organization of family members (both immediate and extended such as, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, etc. as specifically designated by the soldier), volunteers, and soldiers, as well as others interested in the welfare of the soldier (i.e., fiancés, retirees, etc.). The FSG provides an avenue of mutual support and assistance, and a network of communication among the family members, the chain of command, and community resources.

A Family Support Group is not a:

- ✍ Babysitter
- ✍ Community Taxi Service
- ✍ Financial Institution
- ✍ Professional Counseling Service

Leaders have three important characteristics:

First, they care;

Second, they are going somewhere;

Third, they are able to persuade others to go with them.

Purpose

What is the main purpose of a Family Support Group?

The primary purpose of any FSG is to encourage self-sufficiency among its members by providing information, referral assistance, and mutual support. The FSG achieves family readiness by providing an atmosphere and an agenda of activities which build cohesiveness among unit members.

Family Support Groups do not encourage or foster dependency; they encourage self-reliance!

Common goals for an FSG may include:

- ✍ Welcoming new families.

- ☞ Developing and providing copies of telephone trees to all FSG members within the restrictions of the Privacy Act.
- ☞ Assisting family members to focus and understand the unit's mission.
- ☞ Providing social and emotional support.
- ☞ Sponsoring briefings throughout the deployment/mobilization/redeployment process.
- ☞ Providing information and referring families to appropriate agencies.
- ☞ Participating in development of planning for predeployment, deployment, and reunion activities.

Remember to resource your families, not rescue them!

“You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves” Abraham Lincoln

Roles and Responsibilities

The Commander is ultimately responsible for establishing the FSG; however, an FSG must be owned by its members. Active/Reserve component service members (Commander, Chaplain, Executive Officer [XO], Adjutant [S-1], First Sergeant [1SG], Sergeant Major [SGM]) should only serve in an advisory or resource capacity. This will facilitate the FSG's ability to function on its own during deployment/mobilization.

Many roles exist within an FSG structure. The following may be used as role guidelines:

- a. FSG Leader: The leader can be any family member in the unit whom the Commander has appointed and endorsed.

The FSG Leader's responsibilities may include:

- ☞ Becoming knowledgeable of unit mission, existing FSG operating procedures, structure, and community resources.
- ☞ Using existing FSG structure *don't reinvent the wheel*.
- ☞ Organizing unit-level support groups.
- ☞ Tracking and recording volunteer hours.

- ☞ Preparing telephone trees and keeping the lists current.
 - ☞ Obtaining names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of all family members, which may include extended family members and/or fiancés of single soldiers.
 - ☞ Calling the Key Contact Person to activate the telephone tree.
 - ☞ Attending and chairing Family Support Group meetings.
 - ☞ Recruiting, training, and managing volunteers, and using community resources as needed.
 - ☞ Writing and updating volunteer job descriptions.
 - ☞ Ensuring communication is maintained among members.
 - ☞ Coordinating with community resources to provide training for FSG members.
 - ☞ Maintaining communication with the Commander and/or unit Point of Contact (POC).
 - ☞ Identifying family members' concerns and relating those concerns to unit leadership.
 - ☞ Working in conjunction with unit leadership to minimize rumors and stress.
 - ☞ Ensuring volunteers are recognized for their time and efforts.
- b. Key Contact Person: Designated telephone contact volunteer.

The Key Contact Person's duties may include:

- ☞ Calling assigned FSG members.
- ☞ Maintaining up-to-date names, addresses, and telephone numbers for assigned FSG members.
- ☞ Providing timely and accurate information to family members.
- ☞ Ensuring contact is maintained, especially during deployments.
- ☞ Providing information and referral assistance to family members needing assistance.
- ☞ Working in conjunction with unit leadership to minimize rumors and stress.
- ☞ Identifying assigned FSG members' concerns and relating those concerns to the FSG Leader.
- ☞ Attending Family Support Group meetings.

- c. Treasurer: Serves as the fund custodian for the Family Support Group.

The Treasurer's duties may include:

- ✍ Keeping accurate records of FSG funds.
- ✍ Arranging for regular and change of custodian audits.
- ✍ Attending Family Support Group meetings.
- ✍ Providing regular reports to the unit Commander.
- ✍ Providing timely and accurate financial reports to the FSG leader.
- ✍ Establishing and maintaining an FSG checking account.

- d. Family Support Group Member: Individual responsibilities are key to the success of the FSG and may include:

- ✍ Providing updated address and telephone numbers to the FSG Leader/Key Contact Person.
- ✍ Fulfilling any accepted volunteer responsibilities*.
- ✍ Staying informed.
- ✍ Attending and participating in FSG activities.
- ✍ Providing a communication link to other FSG members.

** Additional volunteer roles may include: Newsletter Editor, Welcome/Hospitality, Child Care Coordinator, Special Events, Refreshments, Health and Welfare, and Publicity. Tailor volunteer roles to meet the needs of your unit.*

- e. Unit Commander responsibilities may include:

- ✍ Developing a family support plan.
- ✍ Establishing unit level FSGs.
- ✍ Including family members in predeployment, deployment, mobilization, and reunion activities.
- ✍ Publicly supporting the FSG.
- ✍ Communicating regularly with the FSG Leader.

- ☞ Appointing an FSG Leader in writing.
 - ☞ Ensuring regulations and standard operating procedures are available for reference.
 - ☞ Ensuring that the FSG Leader is trained.
 - ☞ Ensuring access to necessary equipment, facilities, and supplies during active and sustainment phases of a deployment/mobilization.
 - ☞ Ensuring FSG activities are not contrary to Army interests.
 - ☞ Reviewing FSG financial records.
 - ☞ Ensuring FSG Leader and volunteers receive recognition for their contributions.
- f. Rear Detachment Commander: Active component primary Point of Contact for family members who have questions or need support during the deployment/mobilization process.

The Rear Detachment Commander duties may include:

- ☞ Providing a link (during deployment) between:
 - ☞ FSG and the deployed unit.
 - ☞ FSG and military resources.
 - ☞ Becoming the POC for official actions.
- g. Family Assistance Center: The Family Assistance Center (FAC) is a one-stop information center. A FAC provides a variety of family support services (i.e., ID cards and DEERS, CHAMPUS, Red Cross, Army Emergency Relief, legal, information and referral, and financial) in one central location during deployment, mobilization, and disaster. ACS normally operates this center. In the Reserve Components, the State Area Command and Regional Support Commands may operate the FAC. Families need to know the location of these centers to utilize the services.
- h. Senior Spouse Advisor (SSA): The SSA may be the spouse of the Division, Brigade, or Battalion Commander or the spouse of the Command Sergeant Major. Spouses do not have rank. Spouses' chain of *communication* generally follows the same chain of command established by the military (i.e., communication from company to battalion to brigade, etc.).

The Senior Spouse Advisor responsibilities may include:

- ☞ Providing a communication network between the command, the FSG, and families.
- ☞ Identifying common problems, concerns, and issues, and making recommendations to the appropriate level of command.

- ☞ Promoting and supporting the training of volunteers at all levels of command.
 - ☞ Serving in an “advisory” capacity.
 - ☞ Participating and offering assistance as needed and upon request.
 - ☞ Serving on FSG Steering Committee.
- i. FSG Steering Committee/Executive Advisory Committee: This steering committee may be formed at Brigade or Battalion level. The committee is an aid to the chairperson in keeping the FSG operating smoothly. Membership may include, but is not limited to, the Commander, Command Sergeant Major, Chaplain, Executive Officer, First Sergeant, their spouses, FSG Leaders, and FSG representatives.

The responsibilities of this committee may include:

- ☞ Coordinate unit resources.
- ☞ Assess unit FSGs.
- ☞ Identify issues and make recommendations.
- ☞ Provide guidance, information, and support.
- ☞ Provide a link between the unit and the community.

Note: Military members are invited to participate but should not hold key positions in the FSG. The FSG should be able to fully function during times of deployment.

Getting Started

Leadership and Planning

As the newly appointed FSG Leader, you should discuss the following with the commander:

- ☞ Command policy and philosophy on FSGs.
- ☞ Frequency of meetings with the Commander.
- ☞ Resources (i.e., access to alpha roster, use of government facilities, funds and reimbursable expenses, office space with desk and chair, access to copy machine, mailing/postage, telephone with on and off post lines, fax machine, supplies, access to computer/typewriter, access to e-mail, and transportation support).
- ☞ Expectations during active and sustainment levels (active is all phases of mobilization/deployment, and sustainment is non-deployment/mobilization periods).

Plan the first meeting:

- ☞ Assess potential FSG population.
 1. Obtain and review alpha/alert rosters (available from the unit adjutant, unit administrator, or family readiness liaison).
 2. Develop and use of a survey sheet.
 3. Obtain and maintain a unit family information sheet.
 4. Determine optimal meeting day, time, and location.
- ☞ Identify resources required.
 1. Child Care (see Child Care section).
 2. Meeting location with seating to accommodate the group (i.e., chapel, unit day room, local spouse club building/center, unit classroom, drill site, community center, school multi-purpose room, youth activity center, dining facility, etc.).
 3. Refreshments.
 4. Set-up and clean-up.
 5. Transportation.
 6. Support staff for first meeting.
- ☞ Determine the best method for marketing the FSG meeting.
 1. Personal contacts via telephone.
 2. Personalized invitations (mailed to family members).
 3. Unit newsletters.
 4. Flyers (attach to Leave and Earning Statement [LES]).
 5. Installation/community newspaper.

6. Radio/television public service announcement (this is a free service).
7. Electronic marquees/bulletin boards.
8. E-mail.

☞ Develop the meeting agenda. The agenda may include:

1. Welcome and sign-in table with nametags.
2. Introductions/icebreakers.
3. Overview of group norms.
 - a. Confidentially
 - b. Everyone is equal regardless of sponsors' rank
 - c. Respect ideas of others
 - d. Stay on track and avoid war stories
4. Mission of unit (brief description).
5. Purpose and role of FSG (brief description).
6. Complete or update family information sheet.
7. Unit/FSG information (i.e., unit training schedule, upcoming events/inspections, hail and farewells, annual training etc.)
8. Ways to disseminate information.
 - a. Telephone trees (notification system)
 - b. Newsletters
9. Plans for the future.
 - a. Volunteer recruitment
 - b. Determine type of FSG (formal/informal)
 - c. Fund raising, if local policy permits (booths, fairs, car wash, bake sales, silent auctions, cookbooks, and bingo)
 - d. Activities (i.e., picnics, holiday parties, outings, guest speakers, mobilization training for families, etc.)
 - e. Determine future meeting dates and time
 - f. Family member training (i.e., AFTB, Academies, etc.)
10. Questions/answers.
11. General discussion.
12. Adjourn (social and refreshment time).

Helpful hints for the first meeting:

☞ Start/end on time.

☞ Stick to the agenda.

☞ Avoid cliques.

☞ Avoid mentioning and using rank.

“Family Support Groups are like Magtag repairman, nobody calls you unless something is broken!!!” Roxy Parrish

Membership and Participation

Family Support Group membership is open to unit family members (immediate and extended family such as, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, etc.), as well as others interested in the welfare of soldiers (fiancés, retirees, etc.).

Encouraging Participation:

- ☞ Survey soldiers and family members to determine needs, interests, and frequency of meetings. Check local resources to obtain samples survey forms.
- ☞ Offer practical activities.
- ☞ Communicate with newcomers soon after their arrival. Offer transportation to the first meeting.
- ☞ Make meetings brief and enjoyable.
- ☞ Provide child care and/or child activities when possible.
- ☞ Do not feed rumors. Although it is not possible to eliminate rumors, they can be curtailed with accurate information.
- ☞ Present a positive image and encourage full participation.
- ☞ Ensure that the FSG provides timely and accurate information and is not perceived as a rumor mill.

Funding Your Family Support Group

Money can be one of the knottiest issues you will face!

Facts:

- ✍ The unit Commander is ultimately responsible and should audit the FSG books at least once a year and/or at change of the custodian.
- ✍ There is a difference between Unit Funds, which are managed by the military, and the FSG Fund, which is managed by the FSG. The military cannot dictate how FSG funds are spent.
- ✍ In many cases, the FSG Fund is considered an informal fund. You can only have \$1,000 in the fund at any time.

Exception: You can raise funds in excess of \$1,000 to cover a specific event. The day after the event, there must be \$1,000 or less in the FSG account. At some installations, the FSG must have the Commander's approval to hold more than \$1,000 in the account. Check with the Financial Management Division within the Directorate for Personnel and Community Activities or the Family Program Coordinator within the Reserve component for regulations.

- ✍ The FSG account is not used to loan money to individuals or groups.

Tips:

- ✍ If you have questions about handling of funds, ask the Commander, Unit POC, unit Family Liaison Officer, or Family Program Coordinator for assistance.
- ✍ The FSG Treasurer is the custodian of funds and is therefore liable for any loss or misuse of funds.
- ✍ Develop a spending plan and guidelines for expenditures. Standardize procedures. Be consistent. Decide what mementos will be given to members, and ensure that everyone receives the same gift.
- ✍ Include FSG members in all spending decisions.
- ✍ Designate the amount of the FSG fund that leadership can spend without consulting the membership.

- ✍ Require more than one signature on checks, as a check and balance procedure.
- ✍ Set up a ledger to closely track receipts and expenditures.
- ✍ Consider opening a non-interest bearing checking account **KEEP RECEIPTS!!**
- ✍ Audit the account when the custodian of the account changes.

Uses of FSG Funds: Funds must benefit the entire group, not individuals. Appropriate uses include, but are not limited to:

- ✍ Meeting refreshments.
- ✍ Deployment farewells.
- ✍ Welcome home activities.
- ✍ Child Care fees during the FSG meetings.
- ✍ Official FSG long distance phone calls.
- ✍ Mileage incurred while on FSG business.
- ✍ Postage and operating supplies in support of the FSG.
- ✍ Special activities designed to foster family involvement and prevent isolation.
- ✍ FSG volunteer training.

Sources of Funds:

- ✍ Appropriated Funds (APF).
- ✍ Nonappropriated Funds (NAF).
- ✍ Fund Raising.
- ✍ Commercial Sponsorship.
- ✍ Donations and gifts.

The Installation Commander determines if APF and NAF are available for FSG support. The Commander delegates this responsibility to an organization on the installation. Contact your DPCA, DCA, FLO, ACS, Family Program Coordinator, or Family Support Liaison Officer for local policy. The NAF may be requested through your Unit Fund custodian.

The Commander may authorize either APF or NAF for training of official volunteers. Appropriated and nonappropriated funds can be used to cover enrollment, expenses, travel, and per diem (meals and lodging). Local policy determines if volunteers may receive an advance of money before leaving their installation. Travel must exceed 50 miles in accordance with the travel regulations.

Following travel, submit a travel voucher to the organization who issues travel orders. Be sure to attach receipts and submit promptly.

Normally, fund raisers are locally approved. Contact DPCA/FMD, Family Support Liaison Officer, or ACS to determine the process. CAUTION: Gambling is illegal in many states, and raffles are considered gambling. Check with local, state, and community policy before holding fund raisers.

Commercial sponsorship may be available to gain local business support for FSG events or activities. Competitive solicitation is usually handled by the Marketing Division of the DPCA. Consult with that office to determine requirements for commercial sponsorship. (AR 210-1, 215-1 defines and explains access and restrictions.) Personal solicitation of local businesses is discouraged and, on some installations, is prohibited. *Reminder:* The joint ethics policy states that the military is not eligible to solicit on or off duty.

If a donation is offered, you may or may not be able to accept it; check local policies.

NOTE: For more information on funds, refer to DA PAM 608-47, Para 3-7, Page 7.

Child Care Issues

The provision of child care is one of the major factors in the success of your FSG. Research the local policies on funding FSG child care. The Child Development Services (CDS) Coordinator or Family Program Coordinator should be your first stop after leaving the Commander's office to explore child care options. Some child care options include, but are not limited to:

☞ Volunteer Child Care in Unit Setting (VCCUS)

1. CDS will provide training for unit volunteers.
2. Someone on site must be certified in CPR.
3. Child Care must be provided on site (with parents).
4. Location should be evaluated for safety.

☞ Short Term Alternative Child Care (STACC)

1. Provided by CDS.
2. On site with parents.
3. CDS charges for this service.
4. Total paid staff required will depend on the number and ages of the children.

☞ Parent Co-Op

☞ Certified Babysitters (i.e., American Red Cross)

Check with CDS Coordinator for local policy and procedures.

“If everyone is thinking alike, then someone isn’t thinking”
General George S. Patton

Family Support Group Activities

During the active phase (period of time when all or part of the unit is preparing for deployment/mobilization), you will find increased participation in your FSG. During the sustainment phase (period of time when the soldier is at their home station), the family members may have less need to interact with their FSG.

The following are suggested activities in support of the active and sustainment phases of an FSG.

Active:

- ✍ Family Information Sheets/Telephone Tree updates.
- ✍ Predeployment/Deployment/Mobilization briefing participation.
- ✍ Information updates.
- ✍ Holiday parties.
- ✍ “Hi Honey” videotape to send to soldiers.
- ✍ Personal development workshops (i.e., Stress Management, Time Management, Coping with Separation, children’s issues during deployment, children’s workshops, etc.).
- ✍ Homecoming and Reunion training.
- ✍ Welcome activities.
- ✍ Volunteer training and recognition.
- ✍ Care package assembly.

Sustainment:

- ✍ Adopt a local charity (i.e., orphanage, hospital, nursing home, shelter, school, etc.).
- ✍ Holiday parties.
- ✍ Volksmarches and fun runs.
- ✍ Marriage enrichment sessions.
- ✍ Dining facility family night.

☞ Coed sports activities.

☞ Welcome activities.

☞ Update Family Information Sheets and test telephone trees.

☞ Volunteer training and recognition.

“Nothing is interesting if you’re not interested” Helen Macinness

Avoiding Burnout

- ☞ Stop and take a breath.
- ☞ Evaluate what you are doing and set priorities.
- ☞ Take care of yourself and your family first.
- ☞ Consider using a phone answering machine.
- ☞ Don't try to be "all to all."
- ☞ Mutual support goes both ways☞*ask for help!!*
- ☞ Look for your own support☞friends, family, church, ACS.
- ☞ Do not over-extend yourself.
- ☞ Know your limits.
- ☞ Make sure you eat and sleep as regularly as possible.
- ☞ Stick to caring, and let Army do its part in delivering specific services.
- ☞ Dysfunctional families will devour you☞*refer to professional organizations.*
- ☞ Understand and stick to the role assigned to you.
- ☞ Learn resources for referring problems and follow through.
- ☞ Don't judge success by numbers.
- ☞ Don't measure success in "thank yous."
- ☞ Don't compare your group to others☞it's not a competition.
- ☞ Seek advice from senior spouses☞they've been where you are now.
- ☞ Learn ways to delegate.
- ☞ Leadership is a risk☞don't try to please everyone.
- ☞ Don't be afraid to try something new.
- ☞ *Don't reinvent the wheel☞use the systems in place!!!*

☞ *Be yourself!!!*

